

Classroom Audio Podcasting

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Education in the twenty-first century should focus on the development of authentic literacy skills for students. Learning to read, write, listen, speak, critically analyze information and communicate ideas using a variety of modalities is vital for children of all ages. Some of the most frequent complaints of writing teachers, however, revolve around a lack of student motivation to write. How can teachers increase students' desire to express themselves effectively and appropriately?

One of the most basic and powerful ways to increase student motivation to write and communicate is to change student perceptions of audience. Some students are motivated to write to please their teacher and earn a high grade, but that is not the case for everyone. Instead of asking students to write exclusively for an audience of one (the teacher) using technology from the mid 1500s (a pencil,) teachers can now challenge students to publish for a global listening audience via a classroom podcast. This article provides an overview of the benefits of classroom podcasting and showcases several exemplary classroom podcasts teachers and students can use as models when creating their own.

PODCASTING DEFINED

What is a podcast? According to Wikipedia, a podcast is “a web feed of audio files (although increasingly people are applying the term to video and other media) that is placed on the Internet for anyone to download. It's usually possible to download the files directly from the website, just as one would normally do; however, special programs called podcatchers exist that let users subscribe to podcasts in order to automatically download and store the media files for later playback.”

Thousands of podcasts are being published for both local and global audiences on a multitude of topics. Two excellent places to find classroom podcasts are the Education Podcast Network (<http://epnweb.org>) and the podcast directory within the iTunes Music Store. iTunes is free software available for both Windows and Macintosh computers (www.apple.com/itunes).

The real power of audio podcasts comes not only from their publication for a potentially global audience via the Internet, but also from the ability listeners have to time and place shift when they enjoy podcasts. Using portable digital music players (including but not limited to an iPod), anyone can listen to a podcast in their car, at the gym, or while multi-tasking during some other activity.

BENEFITS OF CLASSROOM PODCASTING

1. Podcasting is cheap

One of the frequent problems with new educational innovations is their expense. Classroom teachers rarely have direct control over budgetary funds, and school resources for new purchases are always limited. In the case of podcasting, however, a microphone is the only piece of required hardware or software some classrooms may not have already that isn't free. Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net>) is a powerful, cross-platform and open-source audio editing software program ideally suited for classroom podcasting. Fancy USB microphones like the Samson C01U Condenser Microphone (www.samsontech.com) can provide superior audio recording quality, but much cheaper microphones like those available from Wal-Mart (www.walmart.com) or Radio Shack (www.radioshack.com) for less than \$10 can also work well.

In addition to a microphone and software for recording and editing, free podcast publishing tools like Podifer (www.podifier.com) are available to help podcast creators publish their audio files to an Internet server and

create an “RSS feed” used by podcatching software programs like iTunes and the Juice podcast receiver (formerly iPodder: <http://juicereceiver.sourceforge.net>). CCPublisher (<http://creativecommons.org/tools/ccpublisher>) is a software program for Windows and Macintosh computers that publishes podcast audio files to the Internet Archive (<http://archive.org>) for free using a desired Creative Commons (<http://creativecommons.org>) license. Feedburner’s free “smart feed” formatting (<http://feedburner.com>) can be used to make a podcast published with Blogger (<http://blogger.com>) or another blogging tool “friendly” for podcatchers. Feedburner can also track podcast subscription and readership trends for free, creating graphs like Figure 1 which provide details about podcast subscribers.

Readership

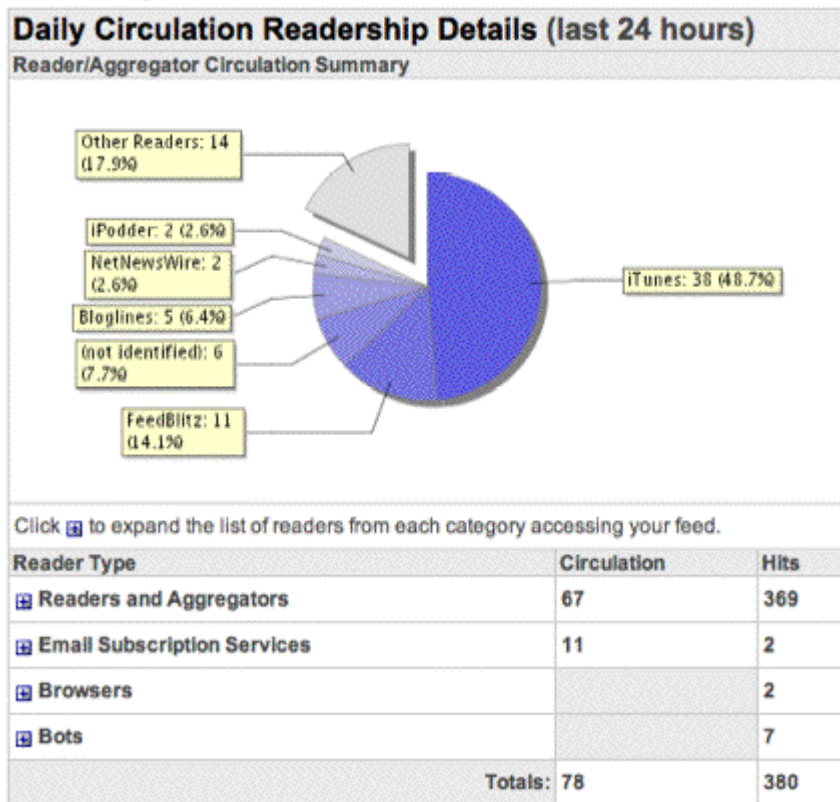


Figure 1: Sample Feedburner Readership Statistics

2. Podcasting invites a global audience

In contrast to “sustaining” educational technologies like PowerPoint or computer-aided instruction programs which primarily support traditional classroom activities like lecture or drill and practice, podcasting is a “disruptive” educational technology. Its disruptive nature is key to both its potential motivational power and the mixed reception it can invite with different audiences. When asked about the possibility of making a classroom podcast, some West Texas administrators have said, “Can’t we just record the students on an audio cassette and send it home for parents?” The idea of publishing audio content directly to the web from a classroom is a prospect that can make some K-12 administrators nervous.

The potential of publishing for a global audience is precisely the characteristic of podcasts which gives them so much motivational power for student writing, however. Third and fourth grade student podcasters in Bob Sprankle’s Maine classroom (<http://bobsprankle.com>) have received email feedback from all over the United States, press coverage in the New York Times, and audio comments from listeners across the Atlantic Ocean in Sweden! Students can get very fired up when they realize other people besides their classroom teacher are

listening to and responding to the ideas they are sharing via a classroom podcast.

3. Audio podcasting encourages no-frills communication

As noted in the preceding definition of podcasting, podcast “feeds” can be used to distribute different types of files, including videos. Audio podcasting, however, encourages students to communicate without many of the bells and whistles that often accompany other types of multimedia modalities. Using PowerPoint, many students become unnecessarily distracted with the selected theme, sound effects, and bullet point entry and exit animations. Using video cameras and software like iMovie or MovieMaker2, students can worry about things like lighting, prop placement, and camera angles. These issues may detract rather than add to the communicative value of a student presentation.

Some scholars have speculated that podcasting may be a harbinger of a new golden age for radio broadcasting via the Internet (Sterne, 2005). Students creating classroom podcasts quickly become attuned to their tone, intonation, speed of delivery, and expression (or lack thereof.) Since audio podcasting inherently has less distracting frills than visual multimedia presentations or videos, some educators contend podcasts can help students focus more on a message’s content and its effective delivery. This focus can be quite useful for teachers struggling to effectively engage digital natives in their classrooms.

4. Podcasting is digital storytelling

Author Dan Pink (www.danpink.com) contends in his book [“A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age.”](#) that professional success and personal fulfillment in the twenty-first century will increasingly depend on six essential aptitudes. Of these, “story” is sense number two. Human beings are innately hardwired for storytelling: It is an activity dating back to the cave. We connect with and remember stories. On a daily basis through a variety of media, we are bombarded with messages increasingly presented as digital stories communicated via Internet websites and other means.

Students need to become media literate citizens and consumers. One of the best ways to help them develop both a greater awareness of and a capability to volitionally respond to manipulative consumer-focused messages is by having them create their own digital stories. Classroom podcasts can serve as an excellent delivery mechanism for digital storytelling.

5. Podcasting provides a window into the classroom

Despite the interconnected nature of our society and our wired classrooms, many parents as well as community members are in the dark about the daily activities which take place in classrooms. Podcasts can provide a virtual “window” into schools, permitting a variety of interested stakeholders to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues students are studying, the new things they are learning, and the evidences of learning (student projects) they are creating as a result of their work both at home and at school.

Just as blogs can provide an immediate as well as archived window into the mind of authors and thinkers, classroom podcasts can provide needed windows into the educational environment. The educational process is a highly complex enterprise, and the benefits as well as challenges of this undertaking cannot be understood through a tabular chart of published test scores in the local newspaper. Both teachers and students can utilize classroom podcasts to share the successes and challenges of their educational exploits with each other and a broader community. This process of sharing can not only enhance the motivation of student podcasters to communicate eloquently and effectively, but also support broader public relations goals of the school district in

informing others about the excellent results achieved by hardworking teachers and students.

6. Podcasting involves few privacy concerns

Publishing student photographs as either still images or video clips to a school website can be an endeavor fraught with multiple privacy concerns. In contrast, audio podcasting can avoid most of these potentially problematic issues. Students speaking during a podcast do not have to identify themselves by name at all, but if they do they can use only their first name. Images of students are not included in podcasts (unless intentionally added later as an “enhanced podcast”), so privacy objections from parents should be minimal. Despite this fact, it is still a good idea to solicit parent permission for student participation in a classroom podcast, even though participation may be already covered in the school district’s acceptable use policy signed by parents/guardians at the start of the academic year.

7. Podcasting can educate about copyright

Copyright issues are far more complex than the Business Software Alliance’s “Play It CyberSafe” website (www.playitcybersafe.com) and “Piracy Deepfreeze Game” might make them appear. As Lawrence Lessig memorably communicates in his web-archived presentation on “Free Culture” (<http://lessig.org/freeculture/free.html>), the creative ideas of today are often the result of synthesized ideas expressed by others in the past. When we are able to “stand on the shoulders of giants” who have gone before us, only then are we often empowered to make even greater strides in a particular area.

Downloading music to enjoy or reuse in a podcast is not an unconditionally illegal and punishable offense. A diverse array of copyright-friendly music files are available from sources like the Podsafe Music Network (<http://music.podshow.com>) and FreePlayMusic (www.freeplaymusic.com) which can be legally used in classroom podcasts. Producing a classroom podcast can provide contextual opportunities for teachers as well as students to learn about Creative Commons (<http://creativecommons.org>) licensing of works including songs, which permit artists to authorize the use of their musical creations in “derivative works” like podcasts. Podcasters can also learn about exciting, legal developments in online music publication and sharing. For more on these issues, refer to Stanford Law professor Lawrence Lessig’s blog at www.lessig.org/blog.

8. Podcasting can be interactive

We are living in the era of web 2.0, or the read/write web. The essence of web 2.0 is interactivity. Podcasters can realize the benefits and excitement inherent in interactive web 2.0 dialog by permitting individuals to send email to a class podcast address (controlled by the teacher) or by leaving comments on a class podcast blog feed. These comments can be moderated by the teacher, so inappropriate comments or spam are not visible to either students or web visitors.

One of the best examples of a classroom podcast which has received a large amount of national and international feedback is the Room 208 podcast from Wells, Maine (<http://feeds.feedburner.com/bobsprinkle/OnVo>). In their podcast from September 23, 2005, the elementary scholars of Room 208 included a compelling audio feedback clip from a listener in Sweden. Room 208 students have also sent “shout-outs” to other students listening and responding to their podcast, like second graders in Lubbock, Texas authoring the Mills Murfee Podcast (<http://feeds.feedburner.com/MillsMurfeePodcasts>).

9. Podcasting can be creative

The future prosperity of the U.S. economy may hinge on the ability of high school graduates to think creatively and out-of-the-box. In our era of high-stakes testing, however, few students may be encouraged to be creative during the regular school day. Podcasting can be a creative outlet for students and teachers alike to express ideas, share perceptions, and even show off intellectually.

Elementary students at Willowdale Elementary School in Omaha, Nebraska produce the “Radio Willoweb” podcast (www.mpsomaha.org/willow/radio/). Under the guidance of expert technology integrator and teacher Tony Vincent, author of the superb Learning in Hand website (www.learninginhand.com), these students really shine in sharing stories about the diverse and in-depth studies they enjoy at school.

10. Podcasting can be fun!

I know it sounds radical and perhaps even revolutionary in our present climate of educational accountability, but I am convinced learning at school should be fun! If teachers cannot find time during the school day for podcasting, a school or classroom podcast can be a periodic after-school activity for student and parent volunteers. Podcasting can be fun and engaging! If it can be used as a tool to further motivate student writers and more effectively communicate with a broad community constituency about great things happening in the classroom, isn't that a winning combination every administrator should want for their campus? The fact that podcasts can be educational and instrumentally valuable in teaching students a variety of important twenty-first literacy skills, while also being fun, is more than icing on the cake.

CONCLUSIONS

We need to get serious about educating today's digital natives for the digital knowledge landscape of the twenty-first century. In many ways, the traditional, “transmission-based” educational model of the past is insufficient for the needs of today's learners and employers. Classroom podcasts can provide engaging opportunities for students to develop desirable skills as digital storytellers and cutting-edge communicators. The price is right, and the benefits are plentiful. Isn't it time you and your students started a classroom podcast?

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